RADICAL ANTHROPOLOGY 101

A Beginner's Guide to Anarchy and Human Nature

10,000 YEARS AGO WE WERE ALL ANARCHISTS!

INTRODUCTION

When discussing anarchy and the possibility of living without any authority, the concept of anarchy opposed to human nature often comes up. How human nature is defined varies widely, however the basic idea behind it is that nature means instinct. To determine an animal's nature is to look at how it normally functions. Anthropologically speaking, human beings have existed for 99% of our 2 million or so years on Earth as hunters and gatherers, living in small, cooperative, equal communities without any rulers, leaders, priests, or presidents. This is a fact. Up until 10,000 years ago, we were all anarchists! The rise of hierarchy came about 10,000 years ago with the rise of agriculture. It seems as though the type of lifestyle that came about through agrarian ways is contrary to our nature. Perhaps this is why anarchy has always existed along side government; why there has been constant resistance to hierarchy and the destruction of freedom. It's our instinctual response to an unnatural situation (which may in some ways also help explain much of the turmoil in the world). To those who argue we must always have leaders and positions of authority, I ask, "What if I don't want to?". No matter what our history as human beings tells us – no one can deny our personal feelings of wanting to break free and have no one rule us but ourselves.

SOME BASIC CONCEPTS

Anarchy – without authority and domination; freedom; a state of being free from authority. Anarchy is often characterized by peace, freedom, autonomy, egalitarianism/equality, mutual aid, and voluntary cooperation

The State – a monopoly of control (often by force) over a given geographic area

Diffuse Sanctions – sanctions that do not require a single power behind them. They may be applied by anyone, and often times society itself has the power. Often found among foraging societies

Laws – Legal sanctions controlled and enforced by an elite group of people.

Foragers – hunter-gatherers who typically live in small, egalitarian, acephalous (non-authoritarian) bands that were in a sort of ecological balance with the Earth

Headman – often considered a leader in foraging societies; this person has no authority what so ever, but is often revered because of age, knowledge, or personality.

Civilization – marked by the domestication of plants and animals (agriculture) which occurred 10,000 years ago, leading to the rise of hierarchy, patriarchy, the State, war, poverty, and ecological destruction. Also, a paradigm which places human beings against (and above) nature, as opposed to the "primitive"

Primitive – of or being primary, first; a once derogatory term to mark "lower" societies, now an often revered term to mark pre-civilized hunting and gathering societies which possess anarchist qualities

What are some real life examples of anarchy?

There are hundreds of examples of anarchy in action, throughout history and in the contemporary world. For instance:

- *While diverse, all foraging societies exist without governments, positions of authority, coercion, "work", etc. Everyone is equal and there is little gender division. Decisions are decided by consensus. In the worst case, irreconcilable disputes can lead to the opposing parties splitting into separate bands. War and organized violence are absent. Ecologically speaking, foraging societies are well connected with the Earth and leave little impact*
- *In 1871, a popular uprising transformed Paris into an anarchist commune and festival in which everyone worked together, created unions and co-ops, and self-government and direct democracy were practiced, all done without the government or the police, until the military entered the picture a few months later and created a bloodbath.*
- *During the Spanish Revolution of 1936, the social revolution which met the Fascist coup on July 18th, 1936, is the greatest experiment in libertarian socialism to date. Here the last mass syndicalist union, the CNT, not only held off the fascist rising but encouraged the widespread take-over of land and factories. Over seven million people, including about two million CNT members, put self-management into practice in the most difficult of circumstances and actually improved both working conditions and output.*
- *The Inuit live without rulers. They have temporary "leaders" who have special skills in hunting or survival, but they exercise no power. Community decisions are made through consensus.*
- *The !Kung San of Africa have no government. One San, in response to a question as to whether his tribe had headmen responded: "Of course we have headmen! In fact we are all headmen…each one of us is headmen over himself".*
- *After the non-violent collapse of the Argentinean government in 2001/2002, Worker occupations of factories and popular assemblies have both been seen functioning in Argentina. Approximately 200 "recovered" factories are now self-managed and collectively owned by workers. In the large majority of them, pay is completely egalitarian ; generally no professional managers are employed, or managers are collectively controlled in the other cases. These co-operatives have organized themselves into networks. Solidarity and support from external groups, such as neighborhood assemblies and unemployed (piquetero) groups, have often been important for the survival of these factories.*
- *Food Not Bombs, an international movement which forms collectives that gather, cook, and distribute food in local communities, operates on a completely voluntary and cooperative basis There are no leaders.*

Wasn't the forager life "nasty, short, and brutish"?

If anything, their lives were much easier than hours. On average foragers had 14 hours of "work" a week. Work consists of gathering and hunting (or trapping, which is much easier), making tools, cooking, making babies, dancing, and visiting others. In many societies, the words "work" and "play" are synonymous. As for health, they often lived long and healthy lives. Cancer, diabetes, and other chronic diseases were absent among these societies. The diet they ate was extremely healthy, they had excellent eye sight, and beautiful teeth. What's important here is not actually quantity of life (because some Foragers did not live as long as some Americans today) but quality of life. Foragers had a high quality of life. Long life expectancies in the Western world often are created through unnatural and obtrusive biomedical means in which life is sustained by chemicals and machines – for those who can afford it. Many others, especially in the US, cannot afford quality health care and therefore do not live as long. Is it better to live a life of 40 or 50 years healthy, fit, and free, or 80 years depending on diapers, a cocktail of pills, and a nursing home?

Even foragers have hierarchy and authority.

Foragers often times have temporary "leaders", those who possess a special knowledge or are exceptionally good at something, however they exercise no control over anyone else in the group. Their suggestions can be accepted or ignored altogether.

Authority and hierarchy are human nature.

Who defines this "human nature"? By nature, we are most often talking about what comes natural or instinctual to a species. As a species, for 99% of our human history (2 million years as Homo sapiens), we have lived as foragers – autonomous, egalitarian, cooperative and free human beings. This is our nature as human animals.

But even among the animals there is hierarchy.

True, some species of animals are hierarchically organized, but the hierarchy among most animals is different than the tyranny and oppression related to human hierarchy. Animals such as wolves and dogs have an absolute hierarchy, whereas cats have what is called a relative hierarchy: each individual may have a different position depending on time, place, and situation in general. Even in our closest relatives, the chimpanzees, we can see hierarchic organization, however this varies For example, bonobo chimpanzees actually have a less pronounced dominance hierarchy as compared to the common chimpanzee. They also have strong female-female bonds and low levels of aggression. We must remember that every animal species is different. As human animals, anarchy is our nature.

Violence is part of our human nature.
All animals can be aggressive, humans included. However, violence (organized aggression, warfare, mutually assured destruction, etc.) is absent among foraging societies. Fights and feuds do exist, but they are more like family feuds than tribal warfare. There are no proto-like elements for war in these small societies.

Aren't primitive societies like the Yanomami violent?
The Yanomami are indigenous horticulturalists from the Amazon. They are not a "primitive" society. They possess a hierarchy, have more stable positions of authority, and are patriarchical. Whether they are as violent as we have read is up in the air, as the main anthropologist studying the Yanomami was an aggressive person who was often projecting his self onto his "subjects". Primitive societies, as stated earlier, possess aggression, but whatever "violence" they have is not nearly as bad as the violence that exists in our society: war, poverty, violence against women, sweatshops, wage slavery, the police, etc.

We can't have anarchy, humans are bad by nature.
Good and bad are subjective terms. They have no validity. How can we judge what is good and bad accept by our own cultural norms and ideas (and since our culture is hierarchical, of course we think we're bad)? You don't need to be "good" or "bad" to have an anarchy. Cooperation, mutual aid, equality, peace – these are all the qualities our ancestors possessed. It is natural. Whether it is good or bad is irrelevant, it just works.

Greed is a part of human nature. Given the chance, people would take all they could and look out for only themselves.
Greed, private property, and the individualism that is mentioned is absent among foraging societies. These characteristics did not arise until the agricultural revolution, when a surplus was created and subsequently coveted by an elite few. Greed is learned, not a natural instinct. Whether someone will become greedy in a particular situation depends on the culture they were raised in. In the West, greed is a cornerstone of capitalist culture. There are many examples of altruism among human beings and other animals. There are also many acts of spontaneous cooperation and solidarity – such as the Argentina revolution (mentioned above), the Seattle WTO protests in 1999, and a few people on the street running to the rescue of an injured stranger.

Aren't you just perpetuating the Noble Savage myth?
This myth paints the picture that "primitive" (as I have defined it) life was perfect. This is not true. Perfection does not exist, and of course there were many problems among foraging societies. They were not perfect, but relative to the world we live in today, there life was a much, easier, healthier, and happier one.

How do we know how people lived thousands of years ago?
There are many ways to understand our past and present. Anthropologists have been studying "primitive" societies for 200 years. Modern foragers are not living fossils – there cultures are the products of the contemporary world, however they allow us to see some of the many possibilities that we could have lived in before civilization. From human fossils, we can analyze bone structure to determine age at death, cause of death, and the diseases one was affected with. Hierarchy, the State, and civilization are all apparent in the archaeological record from domesticated seed remains, different burial styles for different people suggesting social status, different quality of life among individuals, etc.

Anarchy wouldn't work in *our* society.
Of course not! Anarchy is impossible on any large scale – and so it should be. To control a huge population requires centralization, government, and bureaucracy. Anarchy is about being a fully participating member in the decisions that effect one's life. Anarchy is only realizable, preferable, and sustainable on a small scale. Don't think of it as America becoming anarchist – think about it as small communities doing things for themselves.

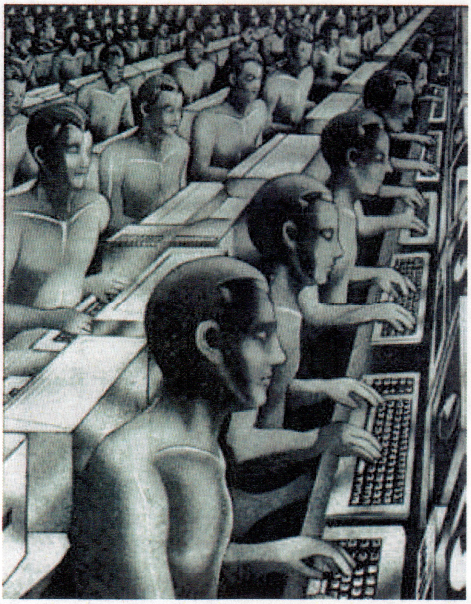
There are too many people in the world to have an anarchy.
This thought suggests that there would be one world Anarchy – which is the exact opposite of our efforts. We want anarchies not Anarchy! But the assumption that there are too many people in the world is correct. It is unsustainable and we will run out of resources soon. Among pre-civilized societies, human beings lived in a more ecologically balanced way – they never took too much from the forests, they never clear cut the land, and they knew a large population would be detrimental to their society. (Agricultural) Surplus is one of the main causes of the rise of overpopulation. Any hope for the future needs to consider a reduction in the human population (through non-violent means, such as switching to subsistence gardening and permaculture rather than industrialism and farming). This reduction is not for those developing nations "over there" but for all "nations" worldwide. Although the US has only 5% of the world population, we use 25% of its resources. Resource consumption must also change.

To have an anarchy would require perfection, and as we all know, utopias can never exist.
Plato envisioned the Republican state, complete with hierarchy, authority, and slaves, to be Utopia. We are currently living out a bastardized version of Plato's dream. Our attempt at a utopia has failed, so why don't we pursue something more meaningful? Utopia requires perfection, and perfection requires an external ideal to live up to. This is something that exists outside ourselves. Anarchy is

anti-utopian for this exact reason. We shouldn't be fighting for something external to us – some social or political ideal. We should be fighting for our own freedom: to live our life the way we want to live it; to pursue our desires and actualize our wildest dreams! Perfection requires conformity to a standard. Anarchy requires nothing. Diversity, not uniformity, is beautiful. To be flawed is to be natural – to be one's self. To strive for perfection is to deceive one's self. Fuck utopia!

Anarchy may be natural to primitive people, but we can't go back to living like that.

Who said anything about going back? The "anarchy" these primitive people possess is the same thing that we possess, only ours is buried under 10,000 years of domestication. We don't want to replicate their cultures. We want our own lives. Our point is that there is something inherent in living a foraging life style close to the Earth, and if there is any hope for the future, we must take that as an important lesson for the way we want to live our lives. If anything, we're not going back, we're peeling away the layers of civilization and uncovering the natural, free, and wild human being inside of us.



"The sickness of civilization consists...in its failure to incorporate (and only then to move beyond the limits of) the primitive."

~Anthropologist Stanley Diamond, In Search of the Primitive

BOOKS USED AND RECOMMENDED

People Without Government: An Anthropology of Anarchy
(Harold Barclay)
-
In Search of the Primitive
(Stanley Diamond)
-
Ishmael
(Daniel Quinn)
-
Days of War, Nights of Love
(CrimethInc.)
-
Guns, Germs, and Steel
(Jared Diamond)
-
Future Primitive
(John Zerzan)
-
Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gathers
(Richard B. Lee)

WEBSITES

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www.greenanarchy.info

www.crimethinc.com

www.crimethinc.net

www.primitivism.com

www.wildresistance.org

www.infoshop.org

www.wildroots.org

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